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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a year-long qualitative study of two elementary classrooms in a suburban community near Cincinnati (Ohio). The classes were very homogeneous racially with no students of Hispanic, African-American, Asian, or Pacific Island descent in either class. Interviews, classroom observations and participation, and analysis of student's written assignments were conducted to examine the historical understanding students brought to school, the social context in which their thinking had developed, and the way their ideas affected their encounter with the content of the school curriculum. Students developed their understanding of the past primarily through interactions with relatives, and they used that understanding to construct a narrative of historical development which explained their own lives in the present. This study suggests that research and instruction should begin not with the content of the school curriculum or the nature of the historical discipline, but with the cultural context in which students' historical understanding develops. Contains 84 references. (EH)

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"My mom taught me":
The situated nature of historical understanding

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"My mom taught me":
The situated nature of historical understanding

Abstract

Understanding children's historical thinking requires placing that thought in the social context in which it develops. As part of a year–long, qualitative investigation of two elementary classrooms, I examined the historical understanding students brought to school, the social context in which their thinking had developed, and the way their ideas affected their encounter with the content of the school curriculum. While most theory and research has focused on two particular contexts of historical understanding—the school curriculum and the nature of the discipline—such academic contexts were not the most important influences on the thinking of the children in this study. Rather, they developed their understanding of the past primarily through interactions with relatives, and they used that understanding to construct a narrative of historical development which explained their own lives in the present. This study suggests that research and instruction should begin not with the content of the school curriculum or the nature of the historical discipline, but with the cultural context in which students' historical understanding develops.

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Research on Children's Historical Understanding

Inadequate conceptualizations of how children understand the past have plagued research on the topic of historical thinking. While recent investigations have moved beyond the search for broad Piagetian stages and have been more sensitive to the specific nature of historical knowledge and thinking, such research largely has ignored the social context in which children learn about the past. By limiting the investigation of historical understanding either to the structure of the academic discipline of history or to the content of standard curricular expectations, most research has failed to clarify the meaning history

has for students or the distinctive features of its development. This failure has been particularly pronounced at the elementary level, where few studies of historical understanding have been attempted.

Piagetian research and beyond

Before the 1980s, research on children's historical thinking was largely limited to several British studies which attempted to determine the age at which students achieved various Piagetian stages of thought when working with historical information. In the most widely cited of these studies, Hallam (1972, 1970, 1967) gave eleven– to sixteen–year–olds written passages on various topics in history and asked them a series of questions about each. He concluded that children younger than twelve usually engaged in preoperational thought—they focused on only one feature of the information, did not relate their answers to the passages, answered from the standpoint of the twentieth century, or failed to consider the logical relationships among the elements of the passages. Only after age sixteen did most students reach what Hallam considered formal operational thought, in which they postulated hypotheses, deduced conclusions, and recognized multiple links among pieces of information. Although few other such studies were published, Booth (1984) noted that twenty–four theses and dissertations on historical thinking had been completed in the United Kingdom since 1955, and all came to the conclusion that children find it harder to think hypothetically and deductively in history than in other disciplines.

Cognitive theorists have extensively criticized the preoccupation with global stages of thought in Piagetian research; these critics argue that people think differently when considering different content, and that the search for universal thought processes is misleading. Most theorists now accept the proposition that the structure of knowledge and nature of thinking varies from one domain of thought to another—thus the way people reason about the physical world (the basis of most Piagetian categories) may be very

different than the way they reason in other areas (Gelman and Baillargeon, 1983; Wellman and Gelman, 1992). A number of researchers have found that children's understandings of the physical, biological, and social worlds are more influenced by the intuitive understandings they develop through direct experience than by any general reasoning abilities (reviewed in Minstrell, 1989; Vosniadou, 1992; Wellman and Gelman, 1992).

Such research points to the importance of considering the specific content of the material about which children are asked to reason—both the background knowledge they bring to the task and the nature of thinking in the area under consideration. Booth (1980) has argued that instead of evaluating historical thinking with a Piagetian framework borrowed from natural science, researchers should analyze children's thinking in terms of the discipline's particular form of knowledge. He argues that historical thought is not primarily *hypothetico-deductive* (as in the sciences) but rather *adductive*—it involves drawing related events together toward a common thematic center. Similarly, Thompson (1972) has criticized Piagetian research in history for being more influenced by a particular theoretical scheme than the cognitive requirements of history; like Booth, he argues that researchers should first determine what historical thinking means, and then devise new methods for investigating its development.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of British researchers did just that—they investigated the ability of students to engage in the kinds of thinking they considered characteristic of history. Booth (1984, 1980), for example, asked students to arrange pictures and quotations into meaningful groups in order to assess their ability to engage in the kind of adductive thought he considered central to the discipline. Lee (1978), on the other hand, argued that explanation in history lies in the ability to take into account the purposes and intentions of historical agents (sometimes referred to as *empathy*) and to distinguish what they knew from what we know now; he and colleagues thus conducted a number of studies designed to explore the way in which children try to explain historical

institutions and individual actions (Ashby and Lee, 1987; Dickinson and Lee, 1984, 1978; Shemilt, 1984a). Similarly, as part of his evaluation of the Schools Council History 13–16 project in Britain—a curricular and instructional program which focused on the nature of history as a discipline—Shemilt (1987, 1984b, 1980) conducted interviews with students to examine their understanding of evidence, methodology, and causation in history. In all these studies, the intent was to discover the extent to which children can engage in the same kinds of thinking as historians, and all found—not surprisingly—that any group of students exhibited a wide range of such cognitive abilities.

North American research into these areas has not yet matched the scope of work in Britain. A few researchers, however, have examined students' understanding of the interpretive nature of historical texts. Wineburg (Wineburg, 1992, 1991), for example, gave several passages describing the same event—from primary sources, textbooks, and fiction—to historians and to high school students, and asked them to explain how they would rank the reliability of each. Both Gabella (1994) and Epstein (1994a) have also conducted interviews with high school students to explore their understanding of the reliability of historical texts, and Barton's interviews with fifth–graders (Barton, 1993) examined their understanding of the interpretive basis of history. All these studies found that students were unfamiliar with the way in which authors create accounts of the past. Several other studies in the United States and Europe, meanwhile, have compared students' ideas about *historical explanation* to those of historians (Carretero, Jacott, Limón, Manjón & León, 1994; Hallden, 1994, 1986; Voss, Carretero, Kennet & Selfies, 1994).

Some American studies have been more concerned with the content of students' historical knowledge than the nature of their thought processes. Patterned on research on scientific misconceptions, this work has attempted to determine the kinds of background knowledge and cognitive schemas that students bring to their study of history. McKeown and Beck (1990), for example, interviewed fifth– and sixth–graders to determine what they

knew about the American Revolution, how that information was structured, and how it changed as a result of instruction. Similarly, Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (1993, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c) interviewed fourth– and fifth–graders to determine what kinds of naïve beliefs, conflations, or misconceptions they had on historical topics, and to gauge the impact of instruction on those ideas. These studies found that while students had previously acquired some information about the historical topics they would encounter in school, this information was generally vague, poorly structured, and often incorrect—and sometimes changed little even after instruction. Other studies have focused on elementary students' ability to understand and retain information from reading passages on historical topics, and have reached similarly dismal conclusions about their ability to make meaningful connections based on such reading (Britt, Rouet, George, & Perfetti, 1994; McKeown and Beck, 1994)

Both British and American research provides important insights into the structure and content of children's historical thinking. By focusing on the knowledge students bring to school and the way they interact with historical information, such work moves beyond the quest for cognitive universals and toward greater sensitivity to the specific content of historical information and understanding. What most of this research fails to do, however, is address the social context in which historical understanding develops; by limiting itself either to disciplinary or school history, it thus makes little headway in the attempt to understand what history means for children.

Culturally situated cognition

A number of theorists and researchers have criticized cognitive psychology for its focus on the individual and its failure to consider the social context of thought. Rogoff (1990, 1984), for example, argues that while cognitive research has become more sensitive to the content of learning and the characteristics of specific tasks, the preoccupation with

domains has prevented the examination of the social context in which learning occurs. Similarly, Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) argue that research on learning must take into account the way in which culture defines what is to be learned and how that learning is put to use. Lave and Wenger (1991) note that viewing people primarily as cognitive draws attention away from the interpersonal context of learning and reifies the concept of *knowledge domain*—thus domains of thinking appear as entities that exist in the real world, rather than as the construction of human interaction. (For further criticisms of the concept of *domain*, see Alexander and Judy, 1988; Ennis, 1989; Keil, 1990; Wellman and Gelman, 1992.)

Drawing on the insights of Vygotsky (1978, 1962), these theorists and others have argued that human cognition and learning can only be understood by placing them in the multiple contexts—interpersonal, social, cultural, and historical—in which they occur. Usually referred to as *situated cognition* or *situated learning*, this perspective assumes that thought is constituted in part or in whole by the community in which it is situated. To understand how people think and learn, then, one must understand the social, cultural, and historical basis of that thought; rather than attempting to examine an individual's privately constructed meaning, one must look to the way in which social interaction, structural and cultural processes, and historical heritages shape meaning. (See, for example, Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989; Lave, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Levine, Resnick, and Higgins, 1993; Rogoff, 1990, 1984; Wertsch, 1991.)

Viewing cognition as socially situated calls attention to two important features of the process of learning—the way in which learners interact with other people in specific settings, and the culturally–defined ways they use their knowledge. This has led to a renewed emphasis on investigating how people outside school go about their work—how historians or others think and use knowledge while engaged in authentic tasks in their fields. Of course, emphasizing the way practitioners go about their work is hardly a new

idea: as both Seixas (1993a) and Wineburg (1989) note, Bruner (1960) pointed to the importance of learning the structure of academic disciplines. Indeed, British and American research examining the ability of students to engage in the methods or thought processes of historians mirrors the authentic tasks extolled by Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), and falls squarely within the *structure of the disciplines* approach to instruction.[1] But while it has focused on the kinds of tasks undertaken by historians, such research has paid little attention to the specifically social nature of historical investigation, and thus has not adequately conceptualized the nature of that discipline. A truly situated perspective on authentic historical investigations would include attention to the social context in which such investigations take place, rather than conceiving of historians as lone scholars interpreting documents in isolation. Levstik and Pappas (1992), for example, argue that investigation of children's historical understanding must begin with the recognition that the discipline of history is carried out as part of a community of discourse, and that its products represent cultural artifacts; they argue that research should therefore examine the ability of children to make meaning from the socially–constituted forms (such as narratives) which result from that community.

Seixas (1993a) also points to the way historians socially construct knowledge, and to the increasing acceptance of the view that their products represent a tentative consensus among the members of a community of inquiry. But Seixas also points out that students in school manifestly are not part of the same intellectual community as historians, nor can they be—they have neither the training nor background to participate in the community of historians. Yet expecting them simply to assimilate the products of historical inquiry—to

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[1] This is not to say, however, that establishing what constitutes an authentic task in history is an easy matter: in a discipline characterized by extensive methodological—and even ideological—diversity (Kammen, 1980; Novick, 1988), the quest for instructional methods which reflect the work of historians will be elusive at best. Calls for authenticity in school tasks sometimes appear to conceive of academic disciplines as unified bodies of thought and methodology, rather than as the diverse—and often divisive—fields they actually are.

treat the accounts of historians as undisputed fact, for example—fundamentally misportrays the nature of historical knowledge. Seixas notes that the teacher of history appears faced with a dilemma—she must either engage students in a process of inquiry for which they are unprepared or ask them to accept uncritically knowledge which historians themselves regard as tentative.

Seixas argues that the resolution of this apparent dilemma lies in structuring the history curriculum not around the products of disciplinary history but around students' own questions about their culture and experience, and about the past which produced them; students should be engaged in inquiry like that of historians, he argues, but such inquiry should focus on the components of historical understanding which help students make sense of their own lives and their situation in the world—rather than on questions which derive solely from disciplinary history. Leaving aside the curricular implications of these suggestions, the importance of Seixas' perspective for research on historical understanding lies in the primacy it assigns to students' own conceptions of history: rather than beginning with the methods or products of the scholarly discipline, this perspective suggests we begin with children's ideas about history—which may or may not have any relation to the academic discipline—and the way they use those ideas to make sense of the present.

Such research is notably rare. Downey (1994, 1993), Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (1993), Levstik and Pappas (1987), and West (1982, 1981, 1978) all found that elementary students had developed ideas about the people and events of the past and the way things have changed over time, but none investigated the social context in which that understanding develops or the uses to which it is put. Levstik's studies of elementary students' response to historical fiction (1989, 1986), on the other hand, dealt more directly with the purposes children bring to history: she found that students considered history interesting because of the personal and emotional relevance of the topics, as well as because

of their *need to know*—their expressed desire to find out the truth about the past, particularly with regard to historical figures who had acted bravely or inhumanely.

Seixas' study of high school students involved in an oral history project (1993b) examined more closely the social context of students' historical understanding. He found that families, television, and popular culture all provided students with sources of historical knowledge; more importantly, the experiences of their families often shaped their underlying approach to history—the way they established historical facts, assessed historical interpretations, and developed hypotheses about historical patterns. Epstein's (1994b) work with secondary students also suggests that family experience and social background exert an important influence on historical understanding, while a recent study by Levstik and Barton (in press) found that elementary children had developed extensive historical knowledge which derived not only from instruction at school but also from popular culture and from interaction with relatives.

The research by Epstein, Levstik and Barton, and Seixas emphasizes the necessity of looking beyond the school curriculum to understand the nature of historical thinking. Such research is particularly critical at the elementary level, for most studies of historical understanding have been conducted with older students; studies of children younger than the sixth grade have most often focused on their retention and recall of factual knowledge rather than on the nature of their thinking in history. The research reported in Levstik and Barton (in press) and Downey (1994, 1993), however, suggests that even children younger than eleven are capable of historical understanding that goes beyond the simple comprehension of stories about the past. Given that a number of educators recently have advocated an increase in the amount of history included in the elementary curriculum, it is absolutely essential to investigate the distinctive features of young children's thinking in the area. The research reported here focuses on the situated nature of that thinking—the social context in which it develops and the culturally–defined ways in which it is put to use.

Design of the Study

Setting

I conducted this research in the classrooms of Amy Leigh and Tina Reynolds, two teachers recommended to me for their innovative and activity–oriented instruction.[2] Theirs was one of three elementary schools located in a suburban community near Cincinnati. The town has been incorporated since the middle of the nineteenth century, and currently consists primarily of stable residential neighborhoods; many families have lived there for several generations. Amy, who grew up and still lives in the community, described it as "very family– and school–oriented." The vast majority of residents are Euro–Americans, and the community has a well–deserved reputation for consisting primarily of well–educated, middle and upper–middle income families. The range of socioeconomic backgrounds, however, is very wide, since the town includes several small public housing projects. Both teachers described the school as having a high level of parental involvement and support, and Tina observed that such involvement was characteristic of the entire range of economic backgrounds. The overall academic achievement of students was extraordinarily high, and the school scored among the top ten in the state during each of the first three years of the state's new testing program (the year of this study and the two preceding years).

Amy's and Tina's classes reflected the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the community. The classes were very homogenous racially, and there were no students of Hispanic, African–American, Asian, or Pacific Island descent in either class. The predominance of Euro–Americans, however, masked some of the diversity of national and

[2]With their consent, I have used the teachers' real names. All students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy and that of their families.

ethnic origins of students' families: both classes mirrored the high proportion of families of German descent in the region, and other students' families had surnames reflecting their origins in Ireland, England, Italy, or other European countries. Some families still identified strongly with these origins, although all had been residents of the United States since at least their great–grandparents' generation. Like many people in this region of the country, several students also knew of specific Native Americans in their ancestry. Slightly more than ten percent of the students in these classes lived in public housing, but the socioeconomic background of most other students was high: a large portion had parents with college degrees and jobs in professional or managerial fields—including executives, teachers, business consultants, engineers, and nurses. Many other parents (especially mothers) worked in clerical or service fields.

Both Amy and Tina described their classrooms as including students with a range of academic abilities, but they considered most to be average or above average academically. Amy's class in particular consisted almost entirely of students whom she described as having high levels of both ability and achievement; Tina considered her class to contain a wider range of students—including several who had serious problems with reading and written composition—but she characterized several students as having exceptional academic abilities. Both also thought the enthusiasm, motivation, and interest of most students was very high; based on my own background as a teacher, I considered students in both classes to have a very high level of motivation, as they were eager to learn, stayed on task, and conscientiously completed homework assignments.

Amy's and Tina's teaching provided extensive opportunities for insight into their students' historical thinking. Both considered themselves interested in history, and both devoted a great deal of time to the topic—history projects and discussions, in fact, often spilled over into other times of the day. Neither used textbooks, and instead conveyed content through tradebooks and their own explanations, combined with student–centered

projects, role plays and simulations, and open–ended writing assignments. Their teaching accorded well with the general principles of effective subject–matter instruction identified by Prawat (1989) and Good and Brophy (1994). Rather than attempting to cover a large amount of miscellaneous information and expecting students to remember isolated facts, for example, Amy and Tina took time to plan sustained instruction in a few topics which they considered important. In addition, Amy and Tina consistently engaged in interactive scaffolding of students' learning. Rarely, for example, did they tell students exactly what to do or how to do it; rather, they used questions to help students develop and improve their own assignments. Both Amy and Tina also encouraged class and small–group discussion, and expected students to respond thoughtfully to their questions and to each other.

During the course of the year, students engaged in a wide variety of instructional activities related to several historical topics. At the beginning of the year, for example, students collected information on their personal histories and developed timelines and presentations about their lives. They also spent several weeks working in groups to investigate changes in aspects of everyday life (sports, work, household technology, cars, etc.) through the use of books, artifacts, and interviews. Students also studied topics such as the Salem witch trials, the French and Indian Wars, daily life in the Colonial Era, the American Revolution, and immigration to the United States at the turn of this century. Studying most of these topics included the use of tradebooks, primary sources, role plays and simulations, presentations to classmates, and written compositions (often written from the perspective of people alive at the time).[3]

[3]Other topics in history came up throughout the year outside the time set aside for formal history instruction. Near the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, for example, both classes watched and discussed a video on the history of the Civil Rights movement. Historical fiction was also a prevalent part of students' reading experience. The fifth–graders in Amy's class read both *The Sign of the Beaver* (Speare, 1983) and *Goodnight Mr. Tom* (Magoriam, 1986) as part of their study of literature, for example, and Tina's class read *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969). Throughout the year, I frequently noticed students reading historical fiction independently.

Methods

In order to investigate students' historical thinking, I used three principal techniques—interviews with students (both formal semi–structured interviews and informal discussions), classroom observation and participation (including frequent discussions with Amy and Tina regarding what students knew and were able to do), and analysis of students' written assignments. By combining these methods, I was able to examine students' understanding in a wide range of contexts and with reference to many different specific topics.

While each method was important in its own way, formal, open–ended interviews with students were perhaps the most important component of the study.[4] I began interviews by showing students a series of pictures from different periods in American history and asking them to put them in order and to talk about the reasons for their placement. I then asked them a series of questions about their understanding of history and about what they had done in class during the year. (The appendix contains a full description of the task, including interview questions and descriptions of the pictures.) Previous research with a similar task (Barton and Levstik, 1994; Levstik and Barton, 1994) indicated that such pictures were helpful in eliciting students' historical knowledge, and were useful as a sort of "warm up" to more conceptual questions about history.

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[4]Most research on children's historical knowledge and understanding has relied on similar semi–structured interview formats, which often consist of asking students open–ended questions (about either specific topics in history or the nature of history itself), sometimes after an initial task involving written text or other documents. Such interviews have a number of very important strengths. By beginning with a structured set of questions, of course, they allow the researcher to compare the responses of students in order to identify overall patterns. But like clinical interviews in the Piagetian tradition, they also allow the interviewer to probe answers in an effort to get at the thinking behind initial responses. The open–ended nature of such interviews also allows the researcher to follow up on unanticipated topics or ideas raised by students, rather than forcing consideration only of a limited set of content.

I interviewed all students in groups of two.[5] I conducted four different series of interviews—the first during August and September, the second during November and December, the third in February, and the fourth in April and May. Although I had initially anticipated interviewing only eight fourth–graders and four fifth–graders—each of them three times over the course of the year—the number of students who returned parental consent forms and their enthusiastic expectation of being interviewed led me to interview each of them at least once. I thus ultimately interviewed thirty–three students (twenty–two fourth–graders and eleven fifth–graders)—eleven of them three times each, three of them twice, and nineteen of them once—during a total of twenty–nine interviews.[6]

I also observed extensively in each classroom; doing so allowed me to ask much more specific questions during interviews, and provided insight into how students' responses related to what they had heard or read in class. The chief advantage of participant observation was that it allowed me to observe students in a much wider range of contexts than interviews alone could have done. Rather than seeing only their responses to my artificial stimuli in interviews, I was able to watch and talk with students as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities. Because students engaged in so many group projects, and because Amy and Tina actively encouraged open–ended, thoughtful discussion of

[5]My own previous work with both individual and group interviews had convinced me of the advantage of talking to more than one student at a time, since it allowed students to discuss and respond to each other's ideas and thereby resulted in more in–depth responses than individual interviews (cf. Ashby and Lee, 1987; Seixas, 1993b). Although interviewing an even larger group of students might have provided more extensive discussion, my experience had also convinced me that the number of overlapping comments and the difficulty of identifying individual speakers makes such interviews extremely difficult to transcribe and analyze. Interviewing students in pairs thus represented a compromise between the maximum amount of discussion and the maximum ease of transcription.

[6] The gender imbalance among fourth–graders in these classes—combined with the expectation of most of them that they would be interviewed—led to a greater proportion of males being interviewed. The fourth-grade included twenty-one boys and only eight girls, and I conducted interviews with fifteen boys and seven girls. (The fifth grade included six girls and five boys, and I interviewed each of them.) The proportion of boys and girls in fourth grade who were interviewed multiple times, however, was more nearly equal: I interviewed four girls and five boys more than once. (Among fifth-graders, I interviewed three girls and two boys more than once.)

topics, my presence in the classroom provided me with innumerable opportunities to record informal and spontaneous comments by students.[7]

I observed on sixty-three occasions—beginning in August and continuing until March (the last time during the year when formal instruction was devoted to history)—for a total of approximately ninety hours. (This total does not include time spent in interviews.) History was typically scheduled for an hour a day, three days a week, and I tried always to be there at the times it was scheduled; over the course of the year, I attended approximately eighty percent of the class sessions devoted to history. Special projects often began earlier or extended later than scheduled, and I tried to remain for those times whenever possible. I also accompanied the classes on three field trips related to history.

In addition to analyzing fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I read a total of 278 written compositions that students produced as part of their regular classroom instruction. Both Amy and Tina gave frequent written assignments in history; most importantly, since these assignments were designed to prepare students for the state's assessment program—which included writing portfolios and open-ended questions in history—they were not of the traditional "fill in the blank" or "answer the questions at the end of the chapter" variety. Instead, assignments usually asked students to draw conclusions supported by evidence (for example, "How has the United States changed over the last 200 years?") or to put themselves in the place of people in history (for example, by writing a letter to a magistrate in Salem protesting a family member's innocence of witchcraft).

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[7]While educational researchers often take the role of *non*participant observers who attempt to position themselves unobtrusively and not to interfere in instruction, I explicitly took a much more active role. In addition to working with Amy and Tina to plan lessons and locate resources, I frequently taught or cotaught lessons in one class or the other, and even more frequently interjected comments, questions, and observations while Amy and Tina were teaching—a practice which they actively encouraged and which fit well with the discussion-oriented nature of their instruction and with the generally open feeling of their classes. When students were engaged in individual or group work I often took on the same role as Amy and Tina—probing students' understanding, asking them questions about the way they carried out the assignment, and providing them with the help they needed.

The primary advantage of analyzing students' writing was that it provided insight into the ideas of students who did not talk frequently during class. Although the level of participation in class and small-group discussions was high, some students (particularly in Tina's room) chose to speak rarely or never. Even when Tina and I tried to draw them into class discussion, their responses were characteristically brief and superficial. Other students, of course, spoke very frequently and had ideas on every question raised. Reading students' compositions provided some corrective to this inequity and enabled me to make sure that relying on more talkative students had not substantially biased my conclusions regarding students' thinking.

Findings

Students often greeted the arrival of the history portion of their day with enthusiasm, and I never saw them visibly disappointed that it was time to begin the subject. Although attention or enthusiasm occasionally waned during some lessons, these periods were infrequent and brief; students almost invariably enjoyed their participation in projects and class discussion, and even writing assignments—difficult for many students—prompted no overt disapproval. Both Tina and Amy shared my perception that students enjoyed history. Moreover, during interviews *every* student said he or she thought history was interesting, and these avowals seemed genuine and sincere; indeed, many students explained that they thought history was a school subject precisely *because* it was interesting. Students' comments often showed that they had a conscious conception of themselves and others as active learners about history—as people with definite interests in the past. Early in the year, for example, Amber told me that she, her mother, and her grandfather knew "some stuff about Indians because we're part Cheyenne, part Blackfoot," while Gary explained, "I'm interested in armies and war and stuff like that, and old

presidents." Students' conception of themselves as interested in and knowledgeable about history, though, had arisen less from their previous experiences in school than from the wider cultural context. Throughout the year, it became clear that students were immersed in history: the local community, the media, and relatives all provided them with information about the past as well as an idea of its relation to the present.

Sources of historical knowledge and understanding

Students often mentioned places or events in their community as a source of information; two boys, for example, said they knew about old cars because of an annual parade that includes a line of antique cars, and Jeremy explained that he was interested in a painting at the post office that "shows a picture of the old guard house in front of the Mess Hall [a local historical landmark], and it shows a whole bunch of old army guys that are standing there." Heather also knew that soldiers ate at the Mess Hall, and that prisoners from the "other side" were there; when I asked her how she knew about that, she excitedly told me how she lived next to it, and how her father had done some of the work on its renovation. Several students also noted going to historical landmarks with their families, and other students mentioned learning about history during visits to museums. People in the community also served as a source of information; Curtis, for example, noted that he had learned about history "because people on my street, there's this old guy that fought in the war and stuff, World War II and stuff, and he has some stuff like gas masks and stuff, real old clothes and stuff, like muskets and stuff, and I think it's just weird how they look, and he's just telling us stories and stuff," while Mandy explained that she went to the library one day, and "met this old lady, and she knew like a whole bunch of people that were like immigrants, that were in the war or something...[and]...she told me all about stuff, and it was really neat, too, like how it happened."

More frequently, students mentioned having learned about history from the media, particularly television and movies. Jenny, for example, recognized a picture of a 1950s

restaurant because "like in movies and stuff you see them, when it's like back here, or like back in this time, like they'll have girls like they roll around on roller skates, so you can eat in your car, and I don't think, they really don't do that anymore." Curtis also recognized a picture of John F. Kennedy (during an interview in late November) "because it was, I think it was his something a few days ago, and there was a bunch going on about it" on television. Kathy mentioned knowing about Indians because of the television show *Doctor Quinn, Medicine Woman*, and Tonya explained that a model tipi she used in a display was from "back when they had the wild west, like you see in some movies now." During a class discussion of schools in the past, it became clear that students were well aware that at one time schools had only one room and students of different ages were mixed together; when Amy asked them where they had learned that, several said they knew from watching *Little House on the Prairie;* students also mentioned that program several times during interviews as the source of their knowledge about schools, the westward movement, and life in the past generally.

The source of historical knowledge students mentioned most frequently, however, was relatives. Near the beginning of the year I read each class a picture book about a family who discovers meaning in the way a grandmother's quilt "tells stories" about their past (Flournoy, 1985), and I asked if their relatives had ever told them about history. In Tina's class, students enthusiastically volunteered to relate what they had learned about the past from relatives; in Amy's class, one student explained learning how he was related to Daniel Boone, others told how their grandfathers and great–grandfathers had fought in wars, and one boy explained that his grandmother's factory identification badge from World War II was in a museum exhibit. References to learning about history from relatives were also a constant feature of interviews. Often; students explained how they knew about particular time periods or events because of what they had learned from their parents or grandparents. Referring to a picture of suffragists, for example, Amber explained that she had learned

about women not being able to vote in the past because "my mom taught me." Similarly, Susan explained, "What my dad taught me is that back then you would have this water fountain for black people to drink out of, and black people would always have to sit in the back of the school bus, and my dad, he told me, my dad and my mom, they told me that, I forget the lady's name, she wasn't really popular, she tried to sit in front of the school bus." And Kenny thought one picture was easy to place because "that's 1960, because everybody—that's just like a weird time in our parents' life, is the sixties, when they were teenagers"; several others made similar comments about the 1960s.

Most often, students mentioned relatives as being simply a source of their general understanding of history; as Wayne said, "My mom and dad tell about history and their parents and a long time ago." Michael also explained, "My dad always talks about history" and about "how people used to live." When I asked Tonya how she thought people found out things were different in the past, she explained,

> Lot of times, if you go to your great–great great–grandma's, or *my* great–great–great–great–great–grandma, she's about a hundred and three now—still living, she's this far away—she had out old, I mean *old* pictures from back then, and she tells lots of stories to us about back then and stuff, and the pictures about how they lived were like...my mom tells me when she was real little they had like no TV; think about that: I *live* on TV.

Nor was hearing about the past from relatives simply an ordeal which students had no choice but to endure; rather, they enjoyed the process, and saw themselves as active participants in it. Whenever I asked if they enjoyed hearing about the past from relatives, they said they did. In addition, some sought their parents' knowledge about historical topics covered in class. Kenny explained, "We've talked about something in school, and then I'd go home and ask my parents something. School has just really given me something, and then I go home and tell that to my family, and then we get started on a talk about how history happened or something." And after Angie explained to me that her mother was seven years old when Martin Luther King was alive, I asked her how she

knew; she explained, "She told me, cause when we learned about Martin Luther King, about him, I went home and I asked my mom how old she was, cause I just wanted to know." In other cases, students were disappointed not to have learned more from their relatives. Jenny, for example, explained that her uncle had been in a war, "but you can't ask him a thing; if you ask him, like my dad has asked him to tell about it, and he walked away from him. He will not even say 'no' to you, there's no way, it's just too painful for him to relive that."

Purpose of learning history

Near the middle of the second semester, Tina was reviewing a timeline of events leading up to the American Revolution, and asked students why it would be important to have the timelines, or even to know about the events they were studying. Their responses reflected several of the themes that emerged in interviews throughout the year, and revealed the diversity of their understanding of the purpose of studying history. The first few students Tina called on simply did not answer; one said the timelines were important "to help us," but could not explain further. Kenny volunteered that the timelines were helpful "so we won't just forget about these dadgoned things." When Tina asked whether he thought the events really were important, he agreed that they were, but his only explanation of why they were important was the self–conscious observation, "Cause you said it."

Surprised by the lack of response, Tina asked the class, "Does this really matter to you?" Some said it didn't, while one student observed that it was important to know "because we'll have to know it in high school." Tina asked if that was the only reason to study history, and Kenny explained that "it still affects us today: if Columbus hadn't discovered America, we wouldn't be here; if we didn't know that, we'd have no idea how we got here." Kirk added, "It will help us remember when it happened, and helps us in life, so we'll know what happened." Tina tried to get more students to elaborate further on

why history is important to study, but got only another comment about needing to know it for tests; she asked students if they would ever be able to use this information outside of school, and got no response.

I then reminded students of the video on the Civil Rights movement (which they had watched two weeks earlier); I asked them why it would be important to know any of that. Many students then became very interested in talking about the video, but often did not actually explain why it was important: they simply restated what they had learned. Kathy, for example, explained that Martin Luther King was important, and had "changed the way blacks were treated"; several other students also volunteered significant content from the video, but without explaining why it was important to know. I pushed them to explain why they would need to know any of it, and finally, Brandon explained, "It affects us now, so we know not to do it. If we didn't know about it, we would still treat blacks like that now." Curtis gave a similar explanation, and concluded, "If that hadn't been, people would still be treating them bad now." Darren also explained that "it's important so that we'll understand how and why we are now."

Interviews demonstrated this same range of understanding, although most students' explanations became more complicated as the year went on. Near the beginning of the year, they often explained that history is important "you would want to know it," "it's interesting," or "you would need to know," and their attempts to elaborate sometimes went no further than referring back to the subject itself; Angie, for example, said that without studying history, "you wouldn't know what the presidents' names were and stuff." Some students gave such answers throughout the year. In December, for example, Sean said, "I can't think of anything; it's, I think it would be interesting to know about stuff that happened a long time ago, cause I wouldn't know about it." And near the end of the year, Travis noted, "That's a good question, and I don't know how to answer that, cause it does seem like they do do a whole bunch of interesting research, but I never did know why."

Some students identified the need to study history in narrowly pragmatic—and sometimes fanciful—terms; Stu, for example, suggested it would be useful in locating hidden treasure or if he were ever to appear on *Jeopardy*.

After students had begun their personal histories, family histories, and research projects, though, most began to express much clearer ideas about why it would be important to study history. For nearly all of them, these reasons related to the creation of a narrative that explained the present. Frequently, students talked about learning history because of the need to know about their own past or that of their families. As Jeremy explained, "I think it's fun to learn about yourself, stuff that you didn't know, like I didn't know I fell down the basement steps [...] and I never even knew that I had my bike in the living room one time, and I crashed into the TV. I didn't know none of that happened. It's just interesting to find out stuff that you didn't know happened to you." Sean explained that history was important because "you might have family members who were killed in World War II; and you would want to remember special moments in your life." Similarly, Nichole thought someone would study history "to find out who all your ancestors are." As Tonya put it, "If you didn't have history, how would you know who's related to you and who's not?" In the following interview early in the year, Kathy and Kenny explore why they are interested in their own histories and those of their families, and explicitly make the connection to their own identities:[8]

Kathy: You could find out things that you didn't even know about yourself.

Kenny: Yeah, you could find out things that you had no idea ever happened.

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[8]In transcribing interviews, I have tried to capture as completely as possible the content and form of the original conversations (although I have omitted sounds like "uh" and "um" without notation whenever they were used by the students or myself). I have marked the deletion of words or phrases within a student's response with a bracketed ellipsis ([...]); deletion of entire student responses within an excerpt is marked by a bracketed ellipsis between lines. Completed responses by students end with a period, while those which were interrupted by another student or myself have no period at the end. An unbracketed ellipsis at the end of a response indicates that the student's inflection suggested he or she had more to say but that he or she did not complete the statement.

[...]

Kenny: You just were born, and now you're nine years old.

Kathy: Yeah, when I was five years old, I didn't remember when I was a baby or anything, and that was when my life first began.

Kenny: Sometimes I think back just, I don't know how, I just [inaudible] and maybe 1986, '87, and '88, that's usually just blank in my life sometimes, I just think, "Gosh, what did I do in those years? What happened in those years?"

Interviewer: So do you like finding out?

Both: [enthusiastically] Yeah!

Kathy: It's fun.

[...]

Interviewer: What about stuff before you were born, farther back, why would you, why would anybody want to know about that stuff?

Kenny: To see what our ancestors lived like, to see what they lived like, and what we live like now.

Kathy: My mom, see, they, once we found a picture, and she was dressed up as a clown, with my dad I think, and they were dressed up like two partners, and I was like, "This is so funny," looking at things from their life.

Interviewer: Okay, so even farther back, things like what Kenny was saying, like ancestors [...] why would that be something that you'd want to study? Why is that either interesting or important?

Kathy: Well [inaudible] like say, one of my ancestors is from, I don't know, I think she's from like, really, England, or something, or Ireland, so she's like half–Irish, so...

Interviewer: Kenny, what were you going to say?

Kenny: I was thinking I would like to know what my ancestors were like, because what they did back then is some, they could be doing something that is exactly the same as what I'm doing right now, from today.

Other times, students explained that knowing history was a way of making sense of the present state of the world. Near the end of the year, Kenny noted that history is important because "everybody's curious," and began to explain that whenever he starts to

watch a hockey game on television, he has to go to bed before it's over. The next morning, he explained, he's always curious to find out who won. Thinking his explanation had played itself out, I moved on to another topic, but he brought the discussion back to his analogy and explained that with history, "it's just the opposite of watching a hockey game, because you couldn't see the whole thing, but you see the beginning, you see the end of how it ended, you want to know how it got started and stuff. It's just like seeing half of everything, I mean, you just want to get that other half, and when you find that other half, it answers millions of questions that changed the world." Perhaps the most significant finding of this research is that over the course of the year, students increasingly combined these two ideas about the purpose of the history: they saw it not just as a way of explaining how they were related to their ancestors, or of explaining how the way the world got to be the way it is, but of explaining *their own place* in the broader sweep of human affairs.

As students encountered new topics in history, they frequently related them to the present day and explicitly located themselves within that historical context, and by the end of the year confidently identified significant events in history that had affected their own lives in the present. During a class discussion of why history was important, for example, Cecil pointed out that "our country might be split in two if there was no Civil War"; similarly, Anthony noted that "if the immigrants didn't come over, we would not be here." Gary also referred to a picture of immigrants during an interview by saying, "That's how our grandfathers, and great–grandfathers and stuff got here," and later referred to a picture of the westward movement by observing, "These are our forefathers." Jenny also explained, "It's just neat to find out stuff about that, and it's, and how like the black people were treated but then some, but we finally let them free, but not actually free, but now you can't have black people as slaves and so they're free now." This use of first person, plural pronouns was the most obvious manifestation of students' location of themselves within

history: referring to "we," "us," or "our" became a staple of historical discussions throughout the year.

Students' conception of their own place within a historical narrative was clearest when I asked them what history had to do with us or the way we live today. In the following excerpt, note particularly the way Michael and Angie use pronouns to locate themselves in history:

Interviewer: What does history have to do with the way we live today?

Michael: Well, a lot of things that have been invented were invented in the past, and we still use them.

Interviewer: Okay.

Michael: If we didn't have the past, we wouldn't have most of the stuff we have.

Interviewer: Okay, I understand. Are there other things that history has to do with the way we live today?

Michael: Well, the way people live: blacks stood up for themselves, so they got rights, and we got our country from England instead of having them just rule us, and other things.

Interviewer: Okay, and how does that affect us today?

Michael: Well, if blacks didn't stand up for themselves, we'd still like be like beating them up and stuff, and we'd be ruled by England.

Interviewer: Angie?

Angie: Well, if they shot all the black people then, then we wouldn't have kids like, then we wouldn't have black kids to be in their school, cause the black people can teach us things, like how their parents used to live, how the way their grandparents used to live.

I also asked students in these final interviews what they thought were the most important things that had happened in history, and their answers were almost unanimous—the Revolutionary War and the Civil Rights movement. In both cases, students described these events by referring to their own place in history, and almost invariably used the word "we." John, for example, explained that "if we didn't fight that or anything, then we would

still be a part of England, and we wouldn't be called the United States of America, and we wouldn't actually be completely free." Angie also explained that "if they didn't fight, England would still be ruling us, and we'd have to do everything that they want us to do." Students' counterfactual explanations—their explanations of how terrible life would be today if there had been no Revolutionary War—were common. Tonya identified the Revolutionary War as one of the most important things in history because it "helped us get free from England, be ourselves over here in America, North America, and not over there"; she went on to explain "if it wasn't for that war, we wouldn't be free to make our own choices now, and let England rule us, and I think it was a big time, a big event in our history, because we wouldn't be here today, talking about our freedom if it wasn't for that." Jesse also thought that without the Revolutionary War, "we wouldn't be here right now, we'd be over there in England, being slaves or something," and Nichole thought "the queen would still be bossing us around." Kathy noted that "if George Washington wasn't president during the Rev–, well, our first commander–in–chief and then became president, then we would not have a president today"; Curtis added that we would "not have America the country or anything."

Events in the history of African–Americans in the United States were also a frequent response to my question about significant events in history, and were often mentioned by the same students who identified the Revolutionary War. John, for example, said that one of the most important things was "the slavery war, like if Lincoln wasn't elected president or anything, then we would still have slaves and whip them and stuff." Stu also noted, "Getting Martin Luther King to stop the prejudice and stuff—there are still some—but if he didn't, then everybody would like be prejudiced, and then like a species of humans would be extinct, a race." Jesse identified one of the most important things as "when we changed slavery," because "then black people would be slaves [inaudible] and instead we have everyone be a lot nicer."

Some students even went so far as to explain that history provided direction for how to act in the present. John, for example, noted that knowing history "helps us to like treat other people." When I asked him what he meant, he explained, "Like when the Nazis and stuff, like Hitler tried to rule the world and stuff, we might have like tried to do that in the future if it didn't stop or something, and then, now that we found out what happened and stuff, everybody knows how to be, like, sort of nice to other people, instead of making all these wars and stuff." The Civil Rights movement provided the most salient example of this perspective for students; Jenny explained, "I think the teachers or whoever want the kids to learn about that, so when they get old they won't think the same as some people do." As Tonya suggested (even before seeing the video on the subject), it is important to know about Martin Luther King because "if you didn't know about that, then right about now people would still be doing what they were doing way back then." Similarly, in the following interview Kathy and Curtis explore how knowing about history affects their current attitudes toward others:

Interviewer:	What about any of these others kinds of things [in the pictures], why would it be important to know about any of this other stuff?
Kathy:	Well, to know how, like
Curtis	Like that [1950s segregation], it looks like everybody's looking at the African–American, like he's real bad and stuff, and they don't like him, it looks like.
Kathy:	Learn how they were always mean.
Curtis:	How they were treated and stuff.
Interviewer:	Well, why would it be important to study about that?
Kathy:	Because we don't want to treat black people like that today, and if we know that
Curtis:	If someone treated him like that, they'll probably arrest him and stuff
Kathy:	Or maybe if they're black, maybe they'll remember their grandpa or maybe their people like that, remember it, and they'll be like, "Oh,

maybe their father or their mother were mean to my grandfather, maybe I should not be nice to them, or maybe I should not hang around them a lot."

Curtis: But what would that change? Because if your grandpa, you don't know if you're like your grandpa, you can be different and stuff and still be friends with them and stuff.

Interviewer: That's a good point. Do you think knowing about history would

Curtis: Change your mind or something?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kathy: Well, yeah, because if I didn't know that there was like a war, kind of like, having black people, maybe I would be really mean to black people.

Curtis: And didn't know that immigrants came, you would probably treat the immigrants mean and stuff because they were from another country and talk another language.

Kathy: And if I didn't really know about Martin Luther King and all that, then it would be like, "Oh, it's just a man who did this, doesn't really matter," or something like that.

Students were also aware that part of the purpose of history is to hand information down across generations, and that they themselves would one day fill the same role as their relatives do today. Charles, for example, explained that people study history "because it's something that happened a long time ago, and you want to know what happened so you can teach your kids some stuff about it, if you have kids, you can like teach people about it, and that might help them do more stuff that's, like not beat up people and stuff." In the following excerpt, Susan and Jean also point to the intergenerational nature of historical understanding:

Interviewer: Why do you think history is something people study?

Susan: Because they want to know about back then.

Interviewer: Why?

Jean: Because it's probably interesting, because *I* think it's interesting.

Interviewer: Why do you think it's interesting?

Susan: Because you know what the world was like back then compared to now.

Interviewer: And what's interesting about that, why would you want to spend time studying that?

Jean: I would usually find it more interesting because of the cars, and the women—how, like, women learned to vote.

Interviewer: So what do you think makes that interesting?

Jean: Because it tells what happened then, to now, and see what things are today, because some people back then made them.

Susan: I just think that it's just interesting, it's things that you can tell your kids when you get older.

Jean: It's like a tradition.

Not only do Jean and Susan see the past as a way to understand the way things are today—like women voting—they explicitly recognize that as an activity handed down socially in families. For them, the purpose of learning history is to know how we got where we are today because of people in the past, and to learn that with the explicit intention of telling your own kids about it some day.

Summary and Discussion

Students in these classes were highly interested in history and consciously recognized their own interest in the subject: they looked forward to history instruction, read about history on their own, and even complained about not having learned more history in school before. Their interest in the subject seems curiously at odds with its place in most schools' curriculum: history rarely receives much attention in elementary school before the fifth grade, many educators find the content of history too abstract or otherwise

developmentally inappropriate for younger students (Crabtree, 1989), and the media frequently portray the subject as the very apotheosis of irrelevant boredom for schoolchildren. Levstik and Pappas (1987) and Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (1993), however, found that students did find history a potentially interesting subject, and the students in Amy's and Tina's classrooms surely would have been shocked to find that anyone could consider history boring.

Their interest in the subject, however, derived not from its place in the school curriculum but from its importance to their self–concept and identity. Far from being irrelevant, history was a pervasive aspects of students' lives outside school, and it was this larger context of historical understanding which provided them with their conception of why history was worth knowing about. Although they had encountered some aspects of history in school before—particularly famous people such as presidents and Martin Luther King—neither the academic discipline of history nor its reflection in the school curriculum provided these students with their principal understanding of the topic. Rather, they had learned about history primarily from historic sites, the media, and (most importantly) their relatives. While students often mentioned the first two of these as the source of their information about particular facts, it was their interactions with relatives that provided them with both their greatest store of general information and their understanding of the nature and purpose of history itself. These interactions provided students with a source of enjoyment, a sense of purpose, and an image of their own future as informants about the past.

Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (1993) found that prior to their first systematic exposure to history, elementary students had little or no understanding of why history was a subject at school or how it might be useful in their lives. More importantly, they found that students developed little additional understanding even after studying the nature of history and the work of historians. In another study, however, VanSledright (1994) found

that many fifth– and eighth–graders had developed their own rationales for studying the topic, and many of these centered on the role of history in forming a sense of self–identity and in providing lessons for the future. My own findings are similar to those of VanSledright. Over the course of the year, many students developed very definite ideas about why history is worth studying. Although their explanations varied widely, most described history as a way of explaining their own lives in the present—not only their individual existence, but also their relationship to relatives and ancestors and their connection to broader topics in American history.

Seixas' typology of the understanding of significance in history (Seixas, 1994) provides a vantage point for analyzing students' explanations. At the most basic level of the typology, students consider historical topics significant either because they are part of the curriculum, or because they themselves are interested in them; in neither case is the issue of significance problematized. At a higher level, students consider significant events to be those which have affected the most people over the longest period of time, or which have had the greatest impact on students' personal lives. And at the highest level, students understood how historical phenomena are linked to the larger fabric of history; they are able to "examine their own lives and concerns and those of their families and ancestors and understand the significance of their activities as subjects and agents in a broad historical context." (p. 13)

Few students I interviewed could be categorized at the lowest level, especially after the year got underway: students almost always talked about history in terms of the way it affected people in the present. Most, in fact, fell at the highest level: they considered the most significant events to be those which have had a fundamental impact on themselves as part of a larger historical context—the way *we* became a free country, or how *we* began to treat African–Americans differently. Most strikingly, students developed this understanding with little overt influence from their teachers. Neither Amy nor Tina explicitly attributed the

same significance to the American Revolution that students did: they presented it in a very balanced way (often pointing to the reasonableness of the British position), and certainly never indicated that the Revolution saved us from being "bossed around by the queen." Moreover, they devoted approximately the same amount of time to the Revolution as they did to the Salem Witch Trials; but while many students thought the witch trials were the most *interesting* topic during the year, not a single student identified them as one of the most *important* topics in history. Students' appraisal of the significance of the Revolutionary War thus derived from their own consideration of its place in history rather than from the explicit (or even implicit) judgments of their teachers.

Similarly, students' understanding of the importance of the history of African-Americans was entirely out of proportion to the attention it received in class. Although Amy and Tina had planned to cover the topic of slavery, they never got to it in any systematic way; its consideration was limited to occasional references in talking about the Colonial era and local history and—most importantly—a video on the history of civil rights. Amy and Tina showed this video in connection with the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, and discussed it with students before and after showing it; it was not part of any larger instructional context. For students, however, it was clearly one of the most important topics of the year. During the ensuing weeks, students referred to the content of the video frequently, and remembered a great deal of specific content from it. Most importantly, students' references to significance in history almost invariably referred back to it. Again, students constructed this perception on their own; neither Amy nor Tina asserted to students that the topic was important so we know how to treat minorities in the present, yet that was precisely the understanding students took away from it.

Carr (1986) maintains that analysis of historical perception must begin not with the accounts produced by the academic discipline of history but with the awareness of the past people have as part of their everyday lives—what he refers to as a "pre-thematic"

awareness. This historical awareness, he argues, is explicitly social—that is, people perceive themselves as part of larger groups (families, nations, ethnic groups, religions, etc.) which have common experiences in the past; these shared experiences form the temporal backdrop against which they perceive their own lives and which provide them with their social identity. Members of such groups recognize themselves as part of the same story, and the frequent reference to "we" in descriptions of the experience of groups is a concrete manifestation of this recognition. For Carr, to accept a common narrative is equivalent to being part of a community. (While Carr's argument is distinctive in its phenomenological approach to the social perception of history, many other authors have pointed to the role of history in maintaining the allegiance of individuals to social institutions and groupings; see, for example, Evans–Pritchard, 1940; Peel, 1984; Pocock, 1962; and Shils, 1981).

Carr's description of historical perception accurately describes the approach these students took to history. They had developed their understanding of history not from their exposure to academic products of historical research but from the past that surrounded them in their daily lives. A number of authors have pointed to the pervasiveness of the past in our everyday experience—both its physical remainder and its influence on our psychology, culture, and society; as Lowenthal puts it, "The past surrounds and saturates us" (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 185; see also Carroll, 1990; Kammen, 1989, 1991; Samuel and Thompson, 1990). But for these students the past was no random collection of experiences; rather, they increasingly placed themselves into the story of history and identified themselves with reference both to their families and to larger history of the country. In addition, many students understood the social nature of this construction of historical understanding; they recognized that history told them who they were, that history was passed down in families, and that they would one day carry on that tradition.

That kind of situated historical understanding is at odds both with the assumptions of elementary textbooks and curricula and with popular perceptions of the role of history in children's lives. Neither the elementary "holiday curriculum" nor the middle grades "march through the centuries" takes into account students who watch documentaries on slavery with their parents; of students who come to school already knowing that women couldn't vote in the past because "my mom taught me"; of students who think it's important to learn about Ellis Island so they'll know how to treat immigrants today; or of students who consider the fact that they themselves will one day be telling their grandchildren about their lives. Of course, not all students' historical understanding will be similarly situated; students from other backgrounds will have different understandings—African-American students, Appalachian students, or Native American students will not necessarily bring identical knowledge to school or have identical understandings of its purpose. Yet what is striking about history instruction is that it so rarely takes account of *any* kind of prior historical understanding. In contrast to a century of theory and research on cognitive psychology, instruction in the subject too often treats children as blank slates—failing either to build on what they already know or to give them a purpose for their learning. Noting this disjuncture between school history and personal meaning, both Seixas (1993a, 1993b) and VanSledright (in press) argue that instruction should directly address students' prior understanding. While the present study did not set out to evaluate any particular curricular approach, Amy's and Tina's instruction—which began with personal and family histories, continued into inquiry projects on the history of everyday life, and then addressed more traditional topics such as the American Revolution—provide a highly suggestive example of how teachers might more effectively build on the experiences students bring to school.

APPENDIX

Interview Procedure, Materials, and Protocol

Procedure

Students whose parents consented to their participation were interviewed in pairs in unused rooms of the school. After explaining the nature and purpose of the interview to students, I obtained their written assent and began recording the interviews; the tapes were later transcribed. Students were interviewed using the open–ended protocol below. I began the interviews by presenting students with two pictures from different times in American history, asking them to put them in order, and asking them to talk about the reasons for their placement; the remaining pictures were then presented one at a time. After sequencing all the pictures, students were asked several questions both about the pictures and about their general understanding of history. I frequently probed students' comments at length. Most interviews took between thirty and forty–five minutes.

Materials

During each interview, students used one of the sets of pictures described below. (During some interviews, students looked at various other pictures during an informal discussion, rather than as part of a formal sequencing task.) These pictures were clear reproductions on heavy paper stock, and each measured approximately eleven by seventeen inches. Set A was identical to the set of pictures used in previous research (Barton and Levstik, 1994; Levstik and Barton 1994). Listed below is the order of presentation of each set of pictures, a description of their contents, and the date or origin for each.

Set A

1. Teenagers standing by a convertible, in front of a restaurant (1956)
2. Family standing in front of a covered wagon in a grassy field (1886)
3. Men and women in bathing suits on a beach, in front of a convertible (1924)
4. Political cartoon depicting an urban street scene (1840)
5. Family at home, sewing and reading (1937)
6. Sawmill with colonial soldiers and Native Americans (1772)
7. Urban schoolroom with teacher and children (1899)
8. Large, modern building with people and contemporary cars (1993)
9. Protesters at Pentagon (1967)

Set B

1. Men in early automobiles, in front of buildings (1895 and 1986)
2. Television studio during Kennedy–Nixon debate (1960)
3. Block party in suburban community (1970)
4. Women's suffrage advocates, carrying pamphlets and banners (1913)
5. African–American family in front of small cabin (1862)
6. Immigrants on deck of an ocean liner (1906)
7. Two women in front of early television set (1931)
8. Men cooking outdoors near cattle, horses, and covered wagons (1871)
9. Lincoln and Union army officers in front of a tent (1861)

Set C

1. Column of cavalry and wagons in Dakota Territory (1874)
2. African–American teenager and crowd of whites on a city street (1957)
3. Urban riot with soldiers and large buildings (1844)
4. Display room of an automobile dealership (1910)
5. Family preparing dinner in a kitchen (1940)
6. American and British officers (1816)
7. Immigrants waiting for ferry at Ellis Island (1912)
8. Exterior of passenger jet airplanes (1970s)
9. Soldiers and anti–war protests (1969)

Protocol

I interviewed students using the following open–ended protocol:

1. Here are two pictures from different times. Take a few minutes to look them over. You may not know exactly what is going on in each picture. That is all right. I'm not interested in whether you know exactly what the picture is, but in how you decide how old the picture is or about when the picture could have happened. There are two things I would like you to do with these first two pictures on the table. First, I would like you to put these two pictures in time order. Please start with the picture that is from the longest time ago (point to the child's left), and then put the picture that is the closest to now right here (point to child's right). You can start in just a moment. Second, while you are putting the pictures in order, I would like you to think out loud about why you are putting them in that order. What I mean is, I want you to explain to me what you are thinking while you are doing it. What things in the picture help you to decide which picture happened longest ago, or most recently. Do you have any questions before we start? Remember to tell what you are thinking as you are putting the pictures in order.
2. Now, I have some more pictures. I am going to give them to you one at a time. For each one, tell me where you think it goes—in between two of them, or before or after, or at about the same time as one of them. Explain why you put them where you did, just as you did with the first two pictures. Do you have any questions about what you will be doing?
3. Now that you have done all of them, are there any pictures you would like to move around? If you do, explain to me why you are moving them.
4. [Point to each picture] When do you think this is?
5. Did you think this was easy or hard to do? What things made it easy or hard?
6. Which pictures did you think were the easiest to figure out? Why?
7. Which pictures did you think were the hardest to figure out? Why?
8. Which pictures did you think were most interesting? Why did you like that one [or those]?
9. If you could go back to visit any of these times, which would it be? Why? Which one would you not like to visit? Why?

Now I have some different kinds of questions that aren't just about the pictures.

1. What can you tell me about how things have changed over time? (How were things different a long time ago?)
2. Why do you think those things have changed over time? (Why do you think things were different a long time ago?)
3. Do you think people were different, or acted differently, in the past? Why?
4. How do people find out about how things were different in the past?
5. If someone were trying to find out about the past and got different answers, how could he or she decide what it was really like?
6. What do you think history is?
7. Why do you think history is something people study?
8. Do you like studying history? (Are there any things you've done this year in history that you like or don't like?)
9. Did you ever study history at school before this year?
10. Have you ever learned about history or the past or long ago outside of school?
11. Those are all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me, or any questions about the pictures?

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